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ABSTRACT

Three studies examined the effectiveness of teaching an unfamiliar prose form using prose modeling (duplicating defining characteristics of a model text using different content). First, English department instructors at four universities were surveyed and of the 70 who responded, 76% stated that they did use modeling in their classrooms. In the second study, 143 freshmen and 21 English department faculty members at Loyola University in Chicago were given one of five study packets which included combinations of a description, a prose model, and an explication of an unfamiliar prose form which the researcher called "modified chosisme" with directions to write in this form after reading the packets. Results indicated that: (1) within each treatment group, faculty wrote more formally modified chosismes than did students; but (2) students who received all three items in the packet wrote modified chosismes with higher average scores than faculty who received only the prose model or the model plus explication. In the third study, the hands of 15 students and 15 faculty members were videotaped as the individuals wrote their modified chosisme essays. Subjects then recalled their thoughts while viewing the videotape. Results indicated that those who achieved the highest scores were those who exhibited the most conscious concern about the task and how they were accomplishing it. Based on the results of the studies, a sample of George Orwell's writing and the prose models approach were used to introduce students to other sentence variations. (The survey instrument, an example of the modified chosisme form, the prose model, the explication, one table of data, the Orwell writing sample, and a student-written imitation of the Orwell sample are attached.) (RS)

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Presented at CCCC, Boston, Massachusetts, March 22, 1991.

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Elizabeth A. Stolarek

"Prose Modeling: Panacea or Poppycock?"

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My presentation today concerns work I've been doing over the past five years on the use of prose modeling in the composition classroom. I define prose modeling as the act of determining the defining characteristics of a model text (that is, a text which is seen as being exemplary of its kind) and developing methods of duplicating these defining characteristics using different content. Prose modeling has been used for such varied purposes as teaching form, style, syntactic variation, paragraph development, or practically any feature of writing an instructor feels is worthwhile to discern and emulate. Prose modeling has its roots in the very earliest of rhetorical studies, and is still commonly used in many classrooms. However, many instructors doubt its effectiveness, and there is little empirical study currently being done on it. My presentation is based on the results from three studies I have completed on prose modeling, and concludes with pedagogical implications of these studies.

I began my study of prose modeling by disseminating a survey (see Appendix A) on prose modeling use to the English Department teachers at four universities. Of the seventy instructors who responded to my survey, 76% stated that they did use modeling in their classrooms. However, in answer to item #16 "How do you feel that the reading of models transfers or carries over into students' writing?" I received responses such as the following:

"Students generally aren't sophisticated enough to define

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and recognize good style and to use from the models what might be adaptable to them"

"I have never really felt as either a student or as a teacher that the transition between reading material and practice in a course is clear or its usefulness selfevident"

and

"students, I've found, are far too constrained by the mere acts of intellection and getting the words on the page to hearken back to models they've read previously."

These comments, I repeat, are from teachers who do profess to use modeling in their classrooms.

Faced with the contradiction of common use of a teaching method which its practicioners seemed to see as useless, I decided to test the use of prose modeling empirically. Since the largest number of survey respondents stated that they used modeling to "teach rhetorical modes" and since form seemed to be a useful study perspective because of its ease of evaluation, I decided to test the effectiveness of using prose modeling to teach an unfamiliar prose form. I also decided to perform the study using both expert and novice writers, in order to see whether experience in writing affects use of prose models.

My study was completed by 143 college freshmen, my novices, and 21 English Department faculty members, my experts, at Loyola University in Chicago. Participants were each given one of five study packets, all of which included combinations of a description, a prose model, and an explication of an unfamiliar prose form which I called the "modified chosisme," with directions to write a modified chosisme after reading their packets. Appendix

B is the description of the prose form, Appendix C, the prose model, and Appendix D, the explication. Participant essays were scored using primary trait analysis, in order to determine which treatment groups wrote essays which were most closely modified chosismes. Appendix E shows the results of that study, with c = combined student/faculty population, s = student population, and f = faculty population. The five treatment groups were I = Description Only, 2 = Model Only, 3 = Description + Model, 4 = Model + Explication, and 5 = Description + Model + Explication. As you can see, in all treatment groups faculty wrote more formally modified chosismes than did students, which was to be expected, but faculty results, like student results, differed according to treatment group. In the student population, those who received just the description or just the model did very poorly in writing modified chosismes, while those who received a description plus model or a model plus explication did much better, and those who received all three items did much better still. In fact, students who received all three items were able to write modified chosismes with higher average scores than were faculty who received only the prose model or the model plus explication.

Since I believed that these study data alone would not give me enough insight into the forces behind prose modeling in writing, I asked thirty of my participants, fifteen students and fifteen faculty members, to participate in a stimulated recall study, a research method developed from work by Ann Matsuhashi Feldman and Mike Rose, concurrently with their participating in

the prose models study. These participants, while writing their essays, had their hand movements videotaped. Immediately after writing their essays, they reviewed the videotapes with me, and commented, while viewing their hands writing, on what they were thinking of at the time they paused, made revisions, or wrote in an effortless manner. Our dialogues were audio-taped, and the tapes were transcribed. These protocols, which are similar to thinking-aloud protocols but are not as intrusive during the writing process as are thinking-aloud protocols, provided a wealth of information about what the various treatment groups, whether they be novices or experts, were thinking as they wrote their essays.

Faculty who achieved the highest scores, the best of the best in this study, were those who exhibited in their protocols the most conscious concern about the task and how they were accomplishing it. They commented on a diverse range of concerns; their self-conscious, self-critical, and introspective manner of attacking the task--their use of meta-language, so to speak--contributed to their success. Students who received all three items in the study, the description, the prose model, and the explication, produced protocols which were more like the faculty protocols than like other student protocols. In the longstanding debate about the role of conceptual consciousness in language production, this study points to the benefits derived by those who were able to consciously criticize their own text and its similarity to a prose model as they wrote.

The results of my studies have led me to re-evaluate my own use of prose modeling in the classroom. I believe that prose

modeling can be a highly effective method of teaching many elements of writing, particularly if the instructor carefully analyzes what he or she wishes students to accomplish and chooses models and designs classroom presentation with this analysis in mind. I currently use prose models with such various purposes as illustrating rhetorical modes, variety in introductions and conclusions, and methods to develop syntactic variation and paragraph development. I'd like to illustrate one way in which I use prose modeling for you.

Often, I find that my students' written work is characterized by undeveloped paragraphs composed in the most commonly used subject-verb-object form. In an effort to introduce them to other sentence variations and to the ways in which paragraphs can be developed, I use one of my favorite examples of well-developed writing, George Orwell, as an example for a technique often called close imitation. Orwell is also used by Ed Corbett as his model for close imitation in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student.

Appendix F is a copy of the Orwell paragraph, which happens to be from "Politics and the English Language," which I use. Students are given the model paragraph and are asked to produce, in groups of two or three, paragraphs which are different from the Orwell in content but exact duplications in terms of syntactic form. In other words, the three-word introductory prepositional phrase used by Orwell, "In our time," must be duplicated by the students with another three-word prepositional phrase. This procedure is followed throughout the whole paragraph, so

that a student effort of this procedure may look like this (Appendix G).

How does this help students? For one thing, it makes them aware of sentence structures which they may have seen in print, but which they've never used in their own writing. For example, many students have never begun a written sentence with a prepositional phrase, as in the first sentence, or have never constructed a periodic sentence, as in the second sentence of the model. Whether exercises such as these promote these same efforts in students' later writing is not definite, but studies in meta-cognition have shown that expert writing is characterized by introspection and evaluation. Efforts to make students more aware of their writing would be giving them some of the tools which experts regularly use. And it is highly unlikely that our students will develop these skills on their own in the relatively short time they have to develop as writers in college. I see exercises such as the one I've shown you as short-cuts to competence for novice writers, and urge all writing teachers to develop exercises which they believe will hasten the advancement of expert writing skills.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1) What is your highest academic degree?
____PhD ____Master ____B.A./B.S. ____Other

2) At what type of school do you currently teach?
____University, offering postgraduate degrees
____4-year, offering baccalaureat degrees only
____2-year community college
____other _____

3) How many freshman composition courses did you teach last year?
____0 ____1-3 ____4-6 ____more than 6

4) How would you describe your course?
____lecture only
____lecture with discussion groups and/or class discussion
____individually paced
____discussion groups
____workshop
____other _____

5) Do you customarily use prose models when teaching freshman composition? (For this survey, prose models can be defined as any sample of writing, a paragraph or longer, that is assigned to a class as a model of what they are to accomplish stylistically, rhetorically, structually, etc.)
____No (if you answered "no" to #5, please answer #6 and #7, and stop)
____Yes (if you answered "yes" to #5, please go on to #8)

6) Did you at one time use prose models when teaching freshman composition?
____yes ____no

7) Why have you decided not to use prose models when teaching freshman composition? Please make additional comments on the back of this sheet if necessary.
_____

_____

8) What percentage of class time do you normally devote to discussion of prose models?
____less than 1/3 ____1/3-2/3 ____more than 2/3

9) What percentage of the total amount of reading assigned is devoted to prose models?
____less than 1/3 ____1/3-2/3 ____more than 2/3

10) What percentage of the writing assignments given are based on prose models?
____less than 1/3 ____1/3-2/3 ____more than 2/3

11) Do you feel, in assigning prose models, that students should consciously imitate the model?
____yes
____no

12) Please rank the following uses of prose models according to what you believe is their effectiveness in teaching, with 1 being the most effective and 7 being the least effective.
Prose models can be effectively used to:

____ teach sentence structure or syntax
____ teach paragraph format or organization
____ teach transitional strategies between sentences or paragraphs
____ give students stylistic models for their own writing
____ teach rhetorical modes
____ give students ideas for generating content
____ give students models of good conduct or strong moral values
____ other _____

_____

13) For which of the purposes in #12 do you use prose models?

_____

_____

14) What are your criteria for choosing a model for the classroom?

_____

_____

15) Please list the titles of or describe the three prose models which you have found to be the most effective in teaching freshman composition.

_____ _____

_____

16) How do you feel that the reading of models transfers or carries over into students' writing? Please use additional space on the back of this sheet.

If you have a particular method of using prose models that you have found to be especially useful, or a particular insight on modeling that you would be willing to share, please elaborate on the back of this sheet. If you would be willing to discuss your method or insight with me, please include your name and an address at which you can be reached. Thank you.

Appendix B

"Modified choisisme" is a prose form that can be defined by its adherence to the following characteristics:

1) It uses extremely detailed physical description.

2) It uses present tense exclusively.

3) It uses a two-paragraph form--the first paragraph is devoted exclusively to establishing the setting and the second paragraph is devoted exclusively to action.

4) It is an objective prose style. By this is meant that:

   a) It is written in third person.

   b) There is an attempt to avoid any explicit feelings, motives, or interpretations.

On the following sheet, you will find an example of an essay written in the modified choisisme prose form. Please read it carefully, paying particular attention to the characteristics of the modified choisisme prose form listed above.

Appendix C

Man and Squirrel

The man is sitting on a park bench reading a newspaper. The bench is made of concrete end pieces connected by wooden bars painted a brick red. The man, whose squarish head is topped with a fringe of gray hair, wears a tan gabardine overcoat with a high collar that is turned up. A brown squirrel is standing in the grass, approximately forty feet from the man. The small park is almost empty, and a slight mist is in the air.

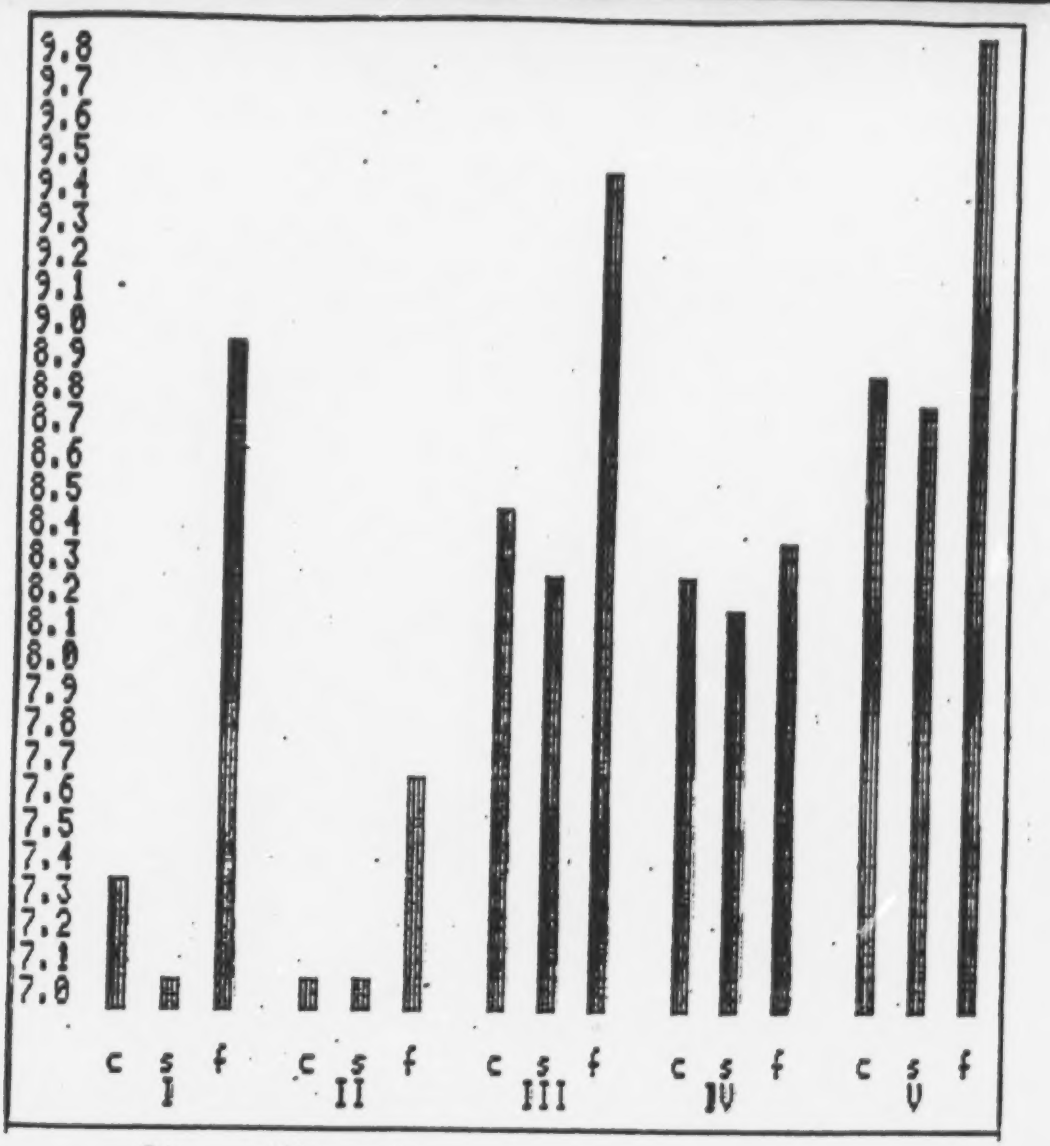
The squirrel bounds across the lawn directly toward the man. It stops about a yard from his feet and extends its head. The man reaches into his right coat pocket and withdraws his hand empty. The squirrel rises to its haunches and begins to chatter. The man reaches into his left coat pocket and again withdraws his hand empty. The squirrel dashes back and forth and finally hops on to the park bench. The man brushes at it with the newspaper. The squirrel leaps away and scurries up the nearest tree, climbing in a spiral path so that it is quickly out of sight on the other side of the trunk.

Appendix D

In the previous essay, notice that, in the first paragraph, the park, the bench, the man and the squirrel were all carefully described. The bench, for example, is described with details that inform us that it "is made of concrete end pieces connected by wooden bars painted a brick red," while the squirrel is described with the adjective "brown." In the second paragraph, on the other hand, you will find no descriptive adjectives, only straightforward action sentences: "The squirrel rises to its haunches and begins to chatter" and "The man brushes at it with the newspaper."

Also, notice that the entire essay is written in third person, and present tense. There is no reference to "I" or "you," and all verbs follow the present tense forms: "is sitting," "bounds," "rises," "dashes," etc. The entire essay is also written objectively; there is no reference made to the man's or squirrel's thoughts or feelings, (i.e., the squirrel is never described as "the angry squirrel," nor is there any such passage as "the man brushes at the squirrel playfully," which would suggest his thoughts or feelings.) Similarly, there is no editorial comment made by the author, such as "This was a pleasant day's play between man and beast."

On the following sheet, please write an essay in the modified choisisme form, following the explanation given above of the form but using your own content. By that I mean that your essay should not be about an old man, a park, or a squirrel. Thank you.



I = Description Only
II = Model Only
III = Description/Model
IV = Model/Explication
V = All Items

Figure 5. Results of combined scoring.

Appendix E

Appendix F

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism.

Appendix G

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In our dorm, loud parties and dances are often the activities of the week-end. Things like the studying of American History for finals, the term papers and essays, the studying for the pop quizzes on Monday, can actually be done, but only by students who are too serious for most others to believe, and who do not date with the opposite sex with any frequency. Thus week-end activities tend to revolve largely around dancing, beer-guzzling and loud frat parties. Whole dorms will descend upon the Alibi, the residents looking around for a friend, the studies really abandoned, the advice given by parents nearly completely forgotten; this is called partying. Groups of students are seen on the dancefloor or talking happily at the tables with new friends that they just met; this is called release of tension or relaxing of anxiety. Students are seen at times walking out, or heading to the dorms with new friends or heading to party till dawn at other gin mills: this is called enjoying the college experience. Such pastimes are necessary if one wishes to keep sane without giving up every hour to studies. Remember for example your good times attending your university.